

Take care of your children but don't forget yourself

How do I know if my child or young person is having trouble?

It is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about things happening in their life. They may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not be aware of how they are being affected by the things happening to them and around them. Parents can look for clues as to how their child is reacting.

Fears and anxiety

Anxiety is a normal part of life for children, adolescents and adults. This is usually a temporary response to stress. While anxiety and fears are normal emotions, prolonged exposure to real and perceived danger and uncertainty can have a harmful impact on the emotional health of children, and may, in some instances, require assistance from mental health professionals.

Untreated severe and persistent anxiety that lasts for a longer period of time may make it difficult for a child to participate in normal activities and enjoy life. Parents, teachers and other caretakers need to be particularly aware of the stress, fear, and anxiety that children experience in response to traumatic events – and to help them understand, cope with, and overcome their concerns and worries.

Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful, and news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore the violence and suffering depicted in the news. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports.

Children and young people who have previously experienced bereavement, separation, abuse, violence or other trauma are more likely to feel sad at this time.

Parents should get further help if they see such things as:

- a significant change in, or problems with, behaviour such as eating or sleeping
- sad, withdrawn, worried or depressed behaviour that does not resolve
- acting-out behaviour and inappropriate behaviour
- frequent new, unusual, or unexplained physical complaints
- symptoms that are affecting the child's ability to function at home, at school, with friends.

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How Adults Can Help

There are many things that parents and other people who are important to children and adolescents can do to help them cope with heightened anxiety and traumatic situations:

- First of all, don't be hesitant to talk to children and adolescents about their fears and anxieties, and the reasons for such emotions.
- When a child brings up the traumatic event, don't discourage them from talking about it and about how it affects them.
- Use language that is appropriate to their age.
- Provide them with simple honest answers. Imagined details may be more disturbing and may only worsen their anxiety, rather than helping them overcome it.
- Be prepared to discuss the same details many times. Be patient, and repeat clear honest answers for the child.
- Help your child avoid false reasoning about the cause of the events that are disturbing them. Let them know that adults also don't always understand why things happen. Take care of your children but don't forget yourself Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.
- Ensure that they realize they are not to blame for what has happened. • Do your best to be supportive, loving and predictable.
- Notify other carers and teachers that the child is experiencing heightened anxiety and fear.
- Encourage them to engage in physical play and exercise.
- Seek help early when it becomes apparent that the child's anxiety and fears are having an impact on their emotional and physical health. (From World Federation of Mental Health).

Take care of yourself

The emotional impact of traumatic events or family illness can have devastating effects on the mental well-being of individuals of all ages. For many of us, it is easy to focus all our energies on helping other people or on maintaining our daily schedules and routines. Although these efforts deserve our attention, it is important to remember to take care of yourself and to monitor your own emotions during difficult times.

Tending to your own mental health and emotional well-being will make you a better, more reliable resource for friends and family members

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- Talk to people about what you are feeling. This is great role modelling • Remember the good times you have had.
- Stay connected with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, etc., to avoid feeling isolated.
- Reflect about your feelings and beliefs with young people. Spiritual rituals and discussions can be very important activities to do as a family and as a community.
- Watch your diet. Many people overeat when they are under stress, which can lead to further feelings of guilt, sadness and hopelessness.
- Get regular exercise to help relieve stress and stay healthy.
- Relaxation techniques are also helpful for daily stress.
- Keep a regular sleep pattern.
- Maintain a daily routine as much as possible.
- Find something constructive and/or fun to do.

Visit our website for a [list of helplines you can contact for support](#).

Canterbury Support Line 0800 777 846